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The Listening Leader: Creating the Conditions for Equitable School

Transformation – A Book Review

Introduction

I had not thought deeply about listening as an essential element in the construct of ethical leadership until I read Shane Safir's book, *The Listening Leader: Creating the Conditions for Equitable School Transformation* (Jossey-Bass, 2017, 330 pp.). Having worked for more than 20 years as a teacher, administrator, and instructional coach, Safir offers readers a first-hand glimpse into the multifaceted role of leading transformation for equitable schools. The subtleness in Safir's suggestions for improving skills in communication and stories of her own missteps as a Listening Leader provide a safe space for readers to reflect meaningfully on their own beliefs and make requisite changes in their practices. Details provided in the scenarios and woven into the content of the text bring additional opportunity for deeper understanding and provide talking points for further discourses in education about listening, ethical leadership, and social justice.

Problem and Purpose

Recent USA trends in schools, workplaces, and social media show an upswing in issues of incivility and insensitivity that deviate from standards traditionally upheld in democratic and caring communities. When leaders fail to practice civility or model high standards for themselves and others, it is easier for some individuals to get off track. Ethical school leaders help others to stay on track, building relationships of trust, taking responsibility for social justice, and

modeling democratic principles within the school and larger community. Setting the tone for respectful treatment of everyone in the organization, ethical leaders elicit feedback from others to learn their perspectives on important issues, advocate for fair and transparent processes, and stand up against indignities and injustices.

Listening as an Ethical Practice

As an ethical leader and transformational agent, the Listening Leader (Safir, 2017) slows down and takes time to hear the stories of others as they reveal their vulnerabilities about issues that affect them—and continues to build trust by making an honest effort to truly understand the issues. Not only do ethical leaders follow ethical processes for making decisions, they take responsibility for listening to others and for listening to their own positive self-talk—and essentially use their personal core values to help guide them toward “win-win” solutions for positive change. Not unlike ethical leaders, Listening Leaders avoid getting caught up in their own biases or demands of our post-modern society, and instead seek a more meaningful sense of balance and connectedness in their relationships with others, personally and professionally.

Underlying concepts of mindfulness, reflection, advocacy, influence, and trust are present throughout Safir’s (2017) book in the form of discussions, scenarios, tips and tools, and key takeaways summarized at the end of each chapter. Safir asserts there is “a larger purpose woven into these pages” (p. xxvii), suggesting a more clearly articulated and encompassing definition of the Listening Leader as one who is capable of creating conditions for school

transformation and influencing complex change. Adopting a school wide practice of deep and strategic listening may not only inspire honest feedback and authentic engagement from teachers, staff and parents, it may also empower students to use their voices regarding decisions about their own education.

Review and Discussion

A leader who is willing to listen is an essential step for bringing change; a leader who is willing to advocate for others and help others take necessary steps for achieving their own goals is vital to influencing the transformation needed for creating equitable schools. In chapter 1, “The Transformative Power of Listening” Safir (2017) suggests school leaders adopt a “listening orientation” (p. 15) to help address situations that may involve dealing with trauma, which includes helping students who themselves have experienced trauma or secondary trauma. Safir adds, “A listening orientation will help you address trauma and secondary trauma by honing your emotional intelligence” (p. 15). School leaders use their abilities to manage and process emotion (Yamamoto, Gardiner & Tenuto, 2014) that may arise after critical incidents or in the everyday routine of administrative matters. Chapter 2 provides a helpful explanation of how the brain functions with respect to emotion and physiological aspects of school leaders tapping into their emotional intelligence to deeply and strategically listen to others who may not share their cultural backgrounds or experiences.

The scenario and discussion presented by Safir (2017) in chapter 3 “Listening for Equity” provides an opportunity for school leaders and educators across the nation and around the world to continue discourses concerning social

justice by initiating conversations centered on topics of “cultural insensitivity” (p. 57), “structural racism” (p. 59), and “unconscious bias” (p. 63). Safir (p. 75) notes,

For Listening Leaders of all backgrounds, there may also be a lesson around the importance of cross-racial alliances. How do we hold each other accountable for missteps without getting tangled in guilt and shame? How do we model for students the need to have courageous conversations alongside the need to acknowledge one another’s humanity and imperfection?

Working successfully within a culturally diverse society requires leaders who incorporate advanced skills in listening, awareness of cultural differences, and self-reflective learning into their practices.

Safir (2017) addresses the importance of building trusting relationships with others to facilitate equitable school transformation in chapter 4, “Getting Ready to Listen”. As further consideration, a school leader’s commitment to “drive out fear” (Deming, 1986, p. 62) from the organization may positively affect the capacity of the learning community to function as a place of trust and care. Driving out fear may not only encourage more honest feedback from teachers, staff, and parents—it may additionally empower students to use their voices regarding decisions about their own education.

In chapters 5 and 6, Safir (2017) explores practices of deep listening and strategic listening with a focused commitment to seeking equitable solutions and sustainable change. While “deep listening” (p. 109) requires a commendable level of trust and skill, “strategic listening” (p. 109) involves getting others to look

outside their own comfort zones to bring the change they desire. Safir (2017) describes three stances for deep listening and three additional stances for strategic listening. Listening Leaders pay attention to nonverbal communication, including nonverbal cues of their own and others (p. 112). Listening Leaders develop the stance of “mature empathy” (p. 116), which allows them to place themselves in others’ shoes so they can develop increased awareness of issues that affect others or cultural sensitivity. Listening Leaders practice a stance of affirmation and Safir claims, “Practicing this stance doesn’t require grand gestures” (p. 120). Nonetheless, teachers and leaders who provide affirmation or positive feedback demonstrate capacity for care and acceptance, which is salient to maintaining inclusive learning communities where *everyone* can experience a sense of belonging.

Chapters 7 and 8, “Listening to Parents” and “Listening to Students” underscore Safir’s (2017) commitment to parent and student voice. Sometimes parents and students need more than help finding their real voices; they also need reassurance that their stories and concerns will be heard—and not dismissed—as an integral part of the educational process. Safir offers tips and tools for listening that help break down existing barriers and create conditions for engaging parents and students in the conversations and empowering them to reach their desired goals. Safir (p. 261) suggests,

To transform our schools and systems will require courage. We must unapologetically name the current reality. We must change the conversation about our most underserved students and families,

interrupting unconscious biases and recognizing the brilliance of every child and the powerful assets of every family. We must value the voices of the unheard.

While Safir (2017) conveys the importance of leaders having the courage to advocate for students whose voices go unheard and teach students to advocate for themselves, she does not explicitly discuss activism as a potential way to bring attention to issues that matter most. Sometimes, advocacy is not enough and leaders and others are called upon to take action *against* unfair treatment of others and *for* civility and supportive relationships and processes that promote positive change within their schools. Despite a leader's attempts to redirect the process or refocus the conversation around a particular issue, others including students, teachers, staff, and parents may deem the issue as compelling and in need of more immediate attention. When the process is expanded beyond the scope of mature empathy and advocacy to include activism for inclusive and equitable learning communities, a leader's sense of courage and commitment can be especially challenged.

Ethical school leaders understand that a failure to act on issues of injustice and incivility not only contributes to the corrosion of a democratic society and culture, it can result in decreased credibility and loss of trust between the leader and members of the organization or larger community. In chapter 8, "Listening to Students" Safir (2017) recognizes, "The goal of listening to students is not just to make our work better—although it will. It is also fundamental to the idea of democracy, the belief that all people have equal rights, responsibilities,

and voice” (p.184). Processes for achieving school transformation using only policy-based and research-based approaches may not be enough to address issues that jeopardize conditions for achieving equitable and democratic learning communities. School administrators and personnel must remain connected to their own personal core values—while not only listening to others but also employing abilities in perseverance and courage—and lead as an example for others.

Chapters 9 through 12 focus on applying concepts introduced in previous chapters for the purpose of implementing deep and strategic listening as an integral part of the school culture (Safir, 2017). In chapter 9, “Influencing Complex Change” Safir adds, “As a leader, you’re in charge, but you’re not in control. Great leaders, like great teachers and parents, understand that at the end of the day, people must find their own way forward” (p. 191). As Listening Leaders, school leaders can influence and cultivate a more meaningful environment committed to practicing advanced listening skills, understanding issues that affect others, and sharing responsibility for social justice. Together, leaders, teachers, students, and parents can create the conditions for more caring, equitable, and ethically-grounded learning communities for future generations.

Conclusion

Although practicing advanced skills in communication is a necessity for school leaders, listening is often overlooked as a core competency in university-based programs of leadership preparation. To advance leadership praxis,

scholars must examine a range of skills and dispositions that support constructs for leading culturally sensitive and equitable learning communities. It is questionable whether or how faculty who work in formal programs that prepare school leaders might go about teaching listening skills and dispositions for promoting ethical and democratic principles. Safir's (2017) book, *The Listening Leader: Creating the Conditions for Equitable School Transformation* provides opportunities for current and aspiring school leaders to explore concepts for creating the conditions for equitable school transformation and assess their own capacity for becoming Listening Leaders.

Resources

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